

The Dual-Edged Sword: Exploring Student Perceptions and Emotional Responses to AI in Academic Writing

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Abstract. *This study investigates Croatian university graduate students' experiences, perceptions, and responses regarding the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in academic writing across three courses. Utilizing a qualitative text analysis approach, the research aimed to answer questions regarding students' reasons for AI tool selection, biggest gains, and challenges. The research examined 64 individual student perspectives derived from essays. Initial findings reveal that AI tools are primarily valued for their capacity to enhance efficiency, accelerate content generation, and stimulate idea formation, reducing the initial burden of academic tasks. However, students consistently articulated concerns regarding AI's accuracy, the reliability of its generated sources, and the generic nature of its output. The study underscores the need for explicit AI literacy education within higher education curricula and the development of pedagogical strategies that effectively integrate AI while simultaneously fostering human-centric skills such as critical analysis, synthesis, and authentic academic voice.*

Keywords. Artificial Intelligence, ICT Integration, Academic Writing, AI Literacy, Students' perceptions, Higher Education

1 Introduction

The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, particularly generative AI systems such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Perplexity AI, and NotebookLM, has significantly reshaped traditional academic writing practices in higher education. These tools offer diverse functionalities including idea generation, drafting, editing, and organizing written work, presenting students with powerful means to enhance their productivity and efficiency (Ozfidan et al., 2024). At the same time, their widespread adoption has ignited debates about academic integrity, originality, and the potential erosion of critical thinking and authentic student voice (Rabbianty et al., 2023); (Gallagher & Wagner, 2024).

Existing literature reflects a growing interest in how students perceive and emotionally respond to these technologies. Studies across different cultural contexts reveal a mixture of optimism and apprehension: while students appreciate the support AI provides for grammar correction, idea structuring, and time efficiency, they also express concerns about ethical misuse, dependency, and the impact on their learning and identity as writers (Hysaj et al., 2024); (Rashid et al., 2024); (Subaveerapandiyar et al., 2025). Emotional reactions also vary widely, with some students experiencing motivation and confidence from AI-generated feedback, while others report anxiety or confusion related to authenticity and academic expectations (Alsaiani et al., 2024); (Guo & Wang, 2024).

Despite these developments, there remains a notable gap in research focusing on student experiences with AI. Most current findings derive from large-scale studies in Anglophone or Middle Eastern educational systems (Bista & Bista, 2025); (Bui & Tong, 2025). There is a need for culturally and pedagogically contextualized studies that provide direct student insights into how they use AI in coursework, the perceived benefits and drawbacks, and how their emotional and ethical outlooks evolve through engagement with these tools.

This paper addresses this research gap by focusing on the Croatian higher education context. Specifically, it investigates practice in three courses at a single Croatian university where it focuses on students' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses regarding the use of AI tools in academic writing across three distinct courses. By grounding the study in students' lived experiences and linking these to broader educational trends, this research aims to contribute insights to current discussions on AI in academia, offering guidance for pedagogical strategies, curriculum design, and institutional policy.

2 Literature Review

The pervasive influence of AI in higher education has substantially impacted academic writing practices,

particularly among students. The emergence of generative tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot has led to an increasing reliance on AI technologies for assistance with brainstorming, grammar correction, paraphrasing, and the structural organization of written work. This shift has spurred a growing body of academic literature dedicated to understanding not only the mechanisms of AI use by students but also their sentiments towards these tools and their perceptions of the educational and ethical ramifications.

A prominent theme in the literature is the evolving conceptualization of AI as a collaborative partner in writing rather than merely a functional utility. Lin (2023) proposed a two-stage human-AI collaborative framework, positing AI as a co-authoring entity capable of assisting across all stages of academic writing, from initial planning to final revision. This work highlighted cognitive benefits such as imaginative stimulation, enhanced fluency, and reduced workload, suggesting that judiciously used AI tools can augment scholarly communication and potentially democratize access to academic publishing. This perspective finds resonance in applied research, such as Douglas (2024), who implemented a structured AI-integrated writing model across five literacy stages (questioning, locating, evaluating, synthesizing, and communicating). Graduate students in this study reported notable improvements in writing confidence, digital research skills, and academic self-efficacy following structured exposure to tools like ScholarAI and Humata.

The affective and cognitive dimensions of AI use are also a significant focus, with studies consistently reporting a spectrum of emotional and psychological outcomes from AI-assisted writing. Kim et al. (2024) conducted in-depth interviews with twenty Chinese university students using a ChatGPT-embedded writing platform, observing that students perceived AI not just as a technical assistant but as a "virtual peer" or "tutor." The tool was particularly valued for alleviating writer's block and providing language support, though students also voiced reservations about the impersonal and sometimes generic nature of the feedback. Similarly, a quantitative study by Dingal et al. (2024) in the Philippines, involving 335 high school students, demonstrated a statistically significant correlation between AI usage and improved academic writing performance. Variables such as AI relevance, user confidence, and AI literacy were identified as particularly predictive of enhanced outcomes, suggesting that technical familiarity with AI amplifies its educational efficacy.

Despite these cognitive and practical advantages, students' comprehension of AI's ethical boundaries appears to be limited. Gabriel (2024), in a study of teacher college students in Austria, noted that while participants generally found AI useful for idea generation and drafting, they lacked a nuanced understanding of its

ethical implications. Many were unaware of academic policies governing AI use, which posed challenges in distinguishing between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct. This concern was further corroborated by Lund et al. (2024), whose survey of students' perceptions of academic dishonesty in the context of AI-generated content revealed considerable confusion regarding permissible versus unethical AI use, especially when outputs from tools like Grammarly closely resembled those of more advanced generative models. This ambiguity is exacerbated by broader discussions surrounding authorship and originality. Rabbianty et al. (2023) found that while faculty in Indonesian institutions appreciated the time-saving benefits of AI tools, they were concerned about preserving the authenticity of student work. Students similarly expressed apprehension that AI-generated outputs might dilute their unique academic voice. John et al. (2024) cautioned that overreliance on AI could stifle originality and critical thought, advocating for revised assessment practices, including oral defenses and reflective tasks, to holistically evaluate student understanding.

Another crucial aspect highlighted in the literature is the role of AI literacy. Hossain et al. (2025), in their study of Turkish EFL learners, observed that while students frequently employed AI tools for grammar checking and translation, their understanding of the functionality and limitations of these tools was minimal. Students often treated AI as a black-box utility, underestimating the risks associated with overdependence or misuse. The imperative for structured AI literacy programs was similarly emphasized by Taiye et al. (2024), who involved students in the co-design of a chatbot (CHAT4ISP-AI) to support academic writing in undergraduate social science education. The study concluded that stakeholder-informed AI tools could be more effectively tailored to meet both pedagogical and ethical expectations.

The literature also delineates varying emotional responses to AI use. Selim (2024) found that Saudi university students in EFL contexts valued AI tools like ChatGPT and Grammarly for enhancing the clarity and coherence of their essays. However, these students expressed ambivalence regarding whether AI use had genuinely boosted their self-confidence or writing independence. Wahyuningsih (2024) echoed this sentiment in a qualitative study of Indonesian undergraduates, where students reported using various AI tools for translation, grammar correction, and plagiarism checks. While these tools were deemed helpful for structure and efficiency, students consistently noted that AI could not foster critical thinking, analytical reasoning, or deeper conceptual engagement.

Students' preferences for AI tools also reflect a pragmatic orientation towards time efficiency and task

automation. Malik et al. (2023) reported that Indonesian students widely adopted AI for essay outlining and plagiarism detection, though some worried that these conveniences might erode creativity and lead to a mechanistic approach to writing.

Bista and Bista (2025) observed similar ambivalence among doctoral students in the United States. While these students lauded the clarity and structure provided by AI, they also highlighted inaccuracies and the necessity for faculty guidance to critically interpret AI suggestions.

Ethical concerns related to inclusivity and equity also emerge in the discourse. Omodan and Marongwe (2024) posited that AI could play a decolonizing role in academic writing by assisting non-native English speakers in overcoming linguistic barriers to publication. Their conceptual framework links AI integration with broader efforts to democratize academic knowledge production, though the authors caution against uncritical adoption without considering cultural and epistemological diversity.

Finally, the role of institutional support and instructional design is emphasized in several studies. Lee-Price (2024) explored academic writing workshops designed to educate students on ethical AI use through activities like paraphrasing and co-creation with ChatGPT. These workshops, grounded in principles of academic literacies and critical pedagogy, helped students reflect on their responsibilities and choices when employing AI in academic settings. In distance learning contexts, Maphoto et al. (2024) found that generative AI increased student engagement and writing motivation. However, educators stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between technological support and independent thinking. Collectively, these studies offer a comprehensive depiction of how students perceive, utilize, and are affected by AI in academic writing. The literature reveals a complex interplay of benefits and challenges: AI can enhance efficiency, confidence, and accessibility, but its use also raises unresolved questions about ethics, creativity, and educational equity. Addressing these tensions necessitates not only policy clarity but also pedagogical innovation and robust digital literacy development.

3 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research design to explore the multifaceted experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses of university students regarding the use of AI tools in academic writing. This approach is particularly suited for in-depth understanding of complex phenomena from the participants' perspectives. The chosen approach is inductive, allowing themes and patterns to emerge directly from the rich textual data provided by student

reflections. Simultaneously, the analysis is guided by specific categories outlined in the research query, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the requested aspects of AI use (Cohen et al., 2018).

Furthermore, this research was carried out as an action research study. Action research is a qualitative methodology focused on solving practical problems within a specific context, often involving practitioners as researchers. It is cyclical, involving planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, aiming for both practical change and knowledge generation (Bradbury, 2015; Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). This approach is particularly relevant in educational settings for improving teaching practices and student learning, as it directly engages participants in the inquiry process to foster immediate and relevant improvements.

The aim of this study is to explore Croatian university graduate students' experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses regarding the use of AI tools in academic writing across three courses. To achieve this aim, the following research questions guided the investigation:

- RQ1: What are the primary reasons students choose to use AI tools in academic writing?
- RQ2: What are the biggest perceived gains for students from the application of AI in academic writing?
- RQ3: What are the biggest challenges students encounter when writing with AI?

The study gathered a total of 64 individual student perspectives, derived from essays. These participants were enrolled in three different university courses: COR#1, contributing 39 individual perspectives; COR#2, providing 23 individual perspectives; and COR#3, with 2 individual perspectives from 1 essay/group. The inclusion of multiple courses and varied student counts per essay offers a diverse, albeit self-selected, sample of experiences with AI in academic writing. The data originates from student reflections submitted as part of their academic assignments, where the application of AI tools was an integral component of the academic writing process. This context is crucial as it ensures that the reflections are directly tied to practical, real-world application of AI in their coursework. Students reported using a variety of AI tools, including prominent generative AI models such as ChatGPT (e.g., versions 3.5, 4o, ScholarAI, Plus), Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity AI, NotebookLM, and the Aria AI chatbot. This diversity of tools used offers a broader understanding of the perceived impacts and functionalities across different AI platforms.

4 Data Collection and Analysis

Student reflections were collected as written responses to assignments that required them to use and comment on their experience with AI tools for academic essay writing. This method yielded rich, first-person qualitative data detailing their interactions, perceived benefits, challenges, and emotional states. The original responses were provided in Croatian. Further, each essay was presented and followed by group discussion. To provide a comprehensive understanding of student experiences, interview responses were collected from 5 students from each course group (COR#1, COR#3, COR#2). The whole data collection process spanned two semesters, encompassing three graduate university courses. Each interview addressed five specific questions: 1) Why did you choose this tool? 2) What did you learn about academic essay writing with the use of AI? 3) How did you feel after the writing? 4) What was your biggest gain from an AI application? 5) What was your biggest challenge when writing with AI? This approach allowed for a structured presentation of emergent themes and common experiences, providing a human-centered perspective on the findings (Cohen et al., 2018).

A systematic six-phase thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. I) Familiarization with the data: This initial phase involved repeated reading of the translated student responses to immerse the researchers in the content and identify initial points of interest. II) Generating initial codes: Specific phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that captured key ideas related to AI use, feelings, gains, and challenges were identified and assigned codes across the entire dataset. III) Searching for themes: Related codes were then grouped into broader, overarching themes that captured significant patterns of meaning within the data. IV) Reviewing themes: This iterative phase involved two levels of assessment: first, evaluating if the themes accurately represented the coded extracts; and second, assessing if the themes captured the essence of the entire dataset. Themes were refined, merged, or discarded as necessary to ensure coherence and representativeness. V) Defining and naming themes: A detailed narrative was developed for each theme, outlining its scope, what it represented, and its significance in relation to the research questions. Clear and concise names were assigned to each theme. VI) Producing the report: The final stage involved weaving the thematic analysis into a coherent narrative for the results section, supported by illustrative quotes from the translated student responses.

5 Limitations

This study, while providing valuable insights, is subject to several limitations. First, the reliance on student self-reflections means the data may be subject to recall bias, social desirability bias, or incomplete reporting of their experiences. Students might consciously or unconsciously present their experiences in a more favorable light or omit certain details. Second, the provided data consists of "partial responses," which inherently limits the depth and breadth of individual student narratives compared to full, in-depth interview transcripts. This constrains the ability to explore complex individual motivations or emotional states in full detail. Third, the findings are derived from a specific university context in Croatia. While providing valuable insights into this particular environment, they may not be fully generalizable to all educational systems or cultural contexts, as AI adoption and academic norms can vary significantly. Finally, the field of AI is rapidly evolving. The capabilities and common uses of AI tools are constantly changing, meaning the findings of this study might become outdated as new models emerge and students adapt their practices.

6 Results & Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed three primary themes characterizing students' experiences with AI in academic writing:

6.1 Theme 1: Efficiency and Speed as Primary Motivators (Addressing RQ1 & RQ2)

Students consistently reported that the paramount reason for adopting AI tools was their ability to rapidly generate content, reduce research and writing time, and streamline the overall academic process. This efficiency was perceived as an enabler for managing workload and meeting deadlines. For example, a student highlighted ChatGPT's provision of "quick access to a large amount of information". Another noted AI's facilitation of "quick content generation" and how it "accelerated the process". One student explicitly stated that AI "extracted information quickly" and made the "research and writing process significantly faster". Similarly, a group of students praised AI for its "great speed" in providing information that would otherwise take "much more time" to find manually. The sentiment was encapsulated by one student who described ChatGPT as "super fast, useful, and incredibly amazing" for its ability to "write chapters in seconds". This consistent emphasis on "efficiency" and "speed" aligns strongly with prior research,

supporting findings by Malik et al. (2023) regarding essay outlining and Dingal et al. (2024) on improved academic writing performance. Lin (2023) also noted reduced workload as a cognitive benefit of AI. This indicates a shift in student strategy, where AI serves as a "kick-starter" or scaffolding mechanism, particularly for overcoming writer's block or structuring initial drafts. The high value placed on speed and efficiency points to the practical challenges students face in managing academic workloads. If AI reduces the "activation energy" required to begin writing, it could lead to more frequent engagement with academic tasks, even if the subsequent human effort for refinement remains substantial. This transforms AI from a mere tool into a strategic resource for managing academic workload and initiating complex assignments.

6.2 Theme 2: AI as a Source of Ideas and Structure (Addressing RQ1 & RQ2)

Beyond mere efficiency, students valued AI for its capacity to generate diverse ideas, propose structural outlines, and offer alternative perspectives on topics. This functionality was seen as highly beneficial for organizing thoughts, enriching content, and exploring different angles of a subject. One student found AI helpful for "content proposals". Another noted AI's ability to "give explanations and more different possible solutions". A student described AI as an "excellent source of ideas" and "explanations for specific problems". The utility of AI in providing "structured and quick shaping of thoughts" and helping to "connect key contemporary themes" was also appreciated. Furthermore, AI's provision of "structured ideas" and "enrichment with new perspectives" was highlighted. Several students simply listed AI as a "source of ideas" or recommended it for "basic structure and guidelines" and "quickly gathering basic information". A particularly insightful comment mentioned AI's utility in "generating ideas, different perspectives" when one is "thinking in only one way". This aligns with Kim et al. (2024) who found students valued AI for alleviating writer's block and Gabriel (2024) who noted AI's utility for idea generation and drafting support. AI's role in idea generation and structuring acts as a significant cognitive offload, particularly in the initial ideation and organizational phases of writing. This frees up students' mental resources, potentially allowing them to focus on higher-order cognitive tasks like critical analysis, synthesis, and refinement, provided they engage critically with the AI's output rather than passively accepting it. By providing initial ideas and structures, AI reduces the burden of starting from scratch. This "offload" can be beneficial if students then use their freed-up cognitive capacity for deeper engagement, such as evaluating the AI's ideas, synthesizing them with their

own thoughts, and refining the overall structure. The effectiveness of AI in this context is contingent upon the student's AI literacy and critical engagement. If used passively, it risks producing generic, unoriginal work. If used actively, it can augment human creativity and analytical depth. This points to a critical pedagogical challenge: how to teach students to leverage AI for ideation without sacrificing their own intellectual contribution.

6.3 Theme 3: Concerns about Accuracy, Reliability, and Depth (Addressing RQ3)

A pervasive and significant challenge reported by students was the questionable accuracy and reliability of AI-generated information, particularly concerning citations and factual data. This often resulted in superficial, generic, or repetitive content that lacked the depth, nuance, or human-like coherence expected in academic writing. For example, one student stated that "literature was not correctly cited, and all data needed additional verification, as the data was not accurate". Another noted that the "literature was not entirely reliable" and the tool "will not every time offer existing and correct" information. A student observed that the "text... sounds like it wasn't written by a human" and lacked "examples or reasons for certain points". Concerns were raised about AI's "misunderstanding of certain topics" and its tendency to output "pre-written information... including unverified sources". Difficulties with "proper referencing and finding reliable references" were reported, with text often turning out "unnatural". One student found that "cited literature did not exist in the format ChatGPT provided". It was also found "very difficult to get expert and accurate definitions" from AI. Students noted that "content sometimes retains a generic character" and "lacked emotional tone and personal dimension". AI sometimes "deviated from the topic" and had a "lack of sources and inability to provide them". One group found the tool used "words the student wouldn't personally use" and "repeated the same point twice". Answers were often "not detailed enough" and showed an "apparent blockage in expressing opinions". AI's "tendency to list things... lacking coherent text writing ability" was criticized. Sources were sometimes "somehow strange" and "not among the top results on Google Scholar". A student reported that AI "refused to cite sources" despite insistence. Finally, one student noted that AI "often gives partially or completely inaccurate answers, and sometimes even completely incorrect ones," and "relies too much on its mechanical learning process... sometimes neglecting online sources". These pervasive issues with accuracy, referencing, and generic output directly reflect the substantial confusion around what constituted permissible versus unethical use

of AI highlighted by Lund et al. (2024) and Gabriel (2024)'s observation of students' limited nuanced awareness of ethical dimensions. This also directly ties into Rabbianty et al. (2023) and John et al. (2024)'s concerns about maintaining authorship and originality, as students themselves voiced fears about AI diluting their academic voice and the need for verification. The frequent reports of incorrect or non-existent sources underscore a critical gap in AI's current capabilities and the urgent need for students to develop robust verification skills. This aligns with Bista and Bista (2025) who highlighted inaccuracies and the need for faculty guidance to critically interpret AI suggestions.

Beyond these primary themes, students also expressed concerns regarding AI's potential to impede their critical thinking and originality, suggesting a risk of "cognitive atrophy" if used passively. This highlights the imperative for students to critically engage with and verify AI-generated content, recognizing AI as an aid rather than a definitive authority. Furthermore, students reported mixed emotional responses, balancing initial satisfaction with frustration over AI's limitations and a diminished sense of personal contribution. These aspects, while noted, fall outside the direct scope of the research questions addressed in this paper.

7 Conclusion

This study provided empirical insights into Croatian university graduate students' experiences with AI in academic writing, highlighting its dual role as an efficiency enhancer and a source of challenges regarding accuracy and depth. The findings underscore a complex interplay between the convenience offered by AI tools and the imperative for students to maintain critical engagement, verify information, and preserve their unique academic voice. Students value AI for its speed and ability to generate ideas and structure, recognizing its utility in managing academic workload and overcoming initial writing hurdles. However, they consistently express significant concerns about AI's accuracy, the reliability of its sources, and its tendency to produce generic content, which they perceive as undermining their intellectual contribution. In summary, students primarily choose AI for efficiency and idea generation (RQ1, RQ2). While AI offers gains in speed and content generation, its biggest challenges lie in accuracy, reliability, and its potential to hinder critical thinking (RQ2, RQ3). The study reiterates the need for comprehensive AI literacy education within higher education. This education should go beyond tool instruction, focusing instead on fostering critical evaluation, ethical considerations, and the integration of AI as an augmentation to, rather than a replacement for, human intellect. Pedagogical strategies should adapt to

this evolving landscape, designing assessments that prioritize process, critical engagement, and authentic student voice. Future research could explore several avenues to deepen understanding of AI's evolving role in education. Longitudinal studies could track the long-term impact of AI on student learning outcomes and cognitive development, providing insights into how consistent AI use shapes intellectual growth. Comparative studies across different disciplines or educational systems would help understand contextual variations in AI adoption and its perceived effects. Finally, action research into the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions designed to foster responsible and critical AI use would be invaluable, providing empirical evidence for best practices in an AI-augmented academic environment.

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